

## An African Metaphysics of Social Order and the Culture of Being-with-others

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### **Abstract**

*The concept of Being in African culture encompasses all forms of existence. Everything in the universe is a being endowed with life-force, albeit, not in equal proportion as some beings are more gifted than others. Humans for instance possess more life-force or beingness than any other being in the physical world. At the metaphysical level, other beings like ancestors and deities are positioned in the higher plane of the hierarchy. One important part of this worldview is that all beings both physical and non-physical have a shared existence. One affects the other either benevolently or malevolently, and this interaction is responsible for the sustenance or destruction of the universe respectively. Considering that the interaction of beings including humans is given metaphysical interpretation, it becomes necessary for this paper to examine and establish this metaphysical foundation as a way of engendering social order. It employs Immanuel Kant's Categorical Imperative which can serve as a principle for social order since it prompts an individual to do to others what they desire should become a universal maxim in interrogating the issue at hand. This is because it provides a means through which we understand and describe humans to be first, rational beings. Some of the findings of this paper are that African metaphysics encourages a complementary relationship, and promotes social harmony as well as an ordered society. The paper would contribute to discourse and knowledge of the African worldview as a means of engendering social order.*

**Keywords:** *Metaphysics, Being, Community, Social order, Culture, Democracy, Family, African ontology, Social Harmony.*

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### **Introduction**

We approach the domain of metaphysics when we inquire about things and go beyond physics. The term 'metaphysics' has its source in Aristotle's book- 'First Philosophy'. Aristotle never described his activities in the book as 'metaphysics' rather, he called it 'First Way of Philosophy'. The first division of the book is called physics, which involves motion. The second part, he called geometry has to do with inert entities and the last part is a description of the wellspring of all motion, which is not substantial and is itself motionless. As Aristotle would like to think, metaphysics is the most honourable, because God is believed to be the reason for all things. If the main genuine principles were material, physical science would be First Philosophy. Numerous researchers presently perceive that not all things are clarified by science. Science brings up issues that it sometimes cannot answer. In this way, empirical science relies on metaphysics as we need to go past empirical science to be able to respond to a number of its inquiries (Selman, 2000).

African culture is strongly rooted in metaphysics in such a way that all of life's experiences from birth to death and even the afterlife are given metaphysical interpretations. Therefore, all forms of knowledge whether of the past, present or future are justified by the metaphysics of their culture. In like manner, it is evident that the culture of science is the culture of investigating and knowing reality. It searches for truth about reality in an organised and systematic manner in a bid to acquire knowledge of the universe and to explain occurrences in our surroundings. Its major interest is to accumulate knowledge about the world and not about reality beyond the physical. However, the irony is that the knowledge that science seeks has its foundation in reality beyond the physical, and this is where metaphysics becomes relevant.

If one takes the general idea of knowledge for instance, it is worth noting that knowledge in the African worldview is necessary for the culture of togetherness, social life or being-with-others because one needs to know in order to communicate with others. No culture it is believed can survive without interaction with the outside world. The modern world has made this interaction very possible so much so that individuals do not have to physically move away from their immediate environment before encountering other cultures. The process of cultural inter-subjectivity which encourages communal life in Africa is a process of knowledge sharing. This shared knowledge is grounded and justified in metaphysics. This is because the justifications for knowledge claims cannot be possible without making recourse to their metaphysical foundations. There cannot be knowledge without belief, they go together. However, not the other way around as there can be belief without knowledge. To know that 'x' is a taboo is to believe that 'x' is a taboo. For that belief to become knowledge, it must itself be justified. That justification would further require its justification. Since this process cannot go on in an infinite regression, we naturally appeal to a first foundation which is totally beyond physical observation. At this point in any claim to knowledge, whether African or Western, we find ourselves in the realm of metaphysics. This is an indication that our knowledge claims and social interactions are deeply rooted in metaphysics. Therefore, to be with others in a socially ordered manner would require some metaphysical interpretations.

### **Theoretical framework**

Immanuel Kant is known for his Categorical Imperative which can serve as a principle for social order since it prompts an individual to do to others what they desire should become a universal maxim. In other words, it encourages an individual to interpret the lived experiences of others in the same way they would love their lived experiences to be interpreted. Through this one can gain access to the very reason why people do the things they do and hold the beliefs they hold. Lindberg (2001) opined that "charity is forced on us, whether we like it or not, if we want to understand others, we must count them right in most matters" because people have sufficient reasons for holding their beliefs and opinions. If we consider ideas and things around us from a standpoint of bias, prejudice, pre-conception and predisposition we end up with a grotesque and distorted picture of such objects and events. But if we approach things from an unbiased, unprejudiced, position we easily understand them as they are, and we are thus enabled to grasp their essences. Only correctly intuited essences could yield absolute certain knowledge. Essences are intuited correctly only by an unbiased, detached, impartial ego or self (Unah, 2004).

### **Africans and the culture of Being-With-Others**

To affirm humans as beings who exist in the world and at the same time as social beings who co-exist with others presupposes inter-subjectivity and for there to be harmony and authentic existence in this form of relationship, there must be constant reconciliation of 'the self' with 'the other' (Oyeshile, 2011). Social beings experience a communal relationship and a community is understandably an aggregate made up of parts. It is a situation where all the parts work in harmony towards a common objective. In a community of beings, there

is a form of interaction that is necessary for the sustenance of the universe. All beings in this category are bound together in the sense that whatever affects the one correspondingly affects the others within the community.

The notion of being had persisted from one philosophical epoch to another with Plato saying that it is a metaphysical and transcendent reality within humans. Immanuel Kant dismissed the idea and called it an impossible venture since he believes that being-in-itself in his own opinion is forever inaccessible to the human mind. This idea was brought to light by Heidegger who wrote in 'Being and Time', that man transcends being a being-in-the-world and that man is also a being-with-others. He was of the view that "only man can raise the question about his being or about being itself" (Stumpf, 1971). Humans therefore are the only beings for whom the question of being is important. He emphasised that an understanding of 'being' is necessary for authentic existence which existentially addresses the challenges associated with being-with-others (Unah, 1996).

The basic elements that make communal life interesting for Africans are cooperation, coexistence, togetherness and inter-subjectivity. This suggests that all beings within such a relationship are directly or indirectly connected to every other being. That is, they are one despite the differences that may exist among them. This is why in the culture of the 'Oza' people of Akoko-Edo in Edo state Nigeria, childbirth calls for communal celebrations. At the naming ceremony, people come together to witness and hear the name by which the child will be called. Such names are usually connected to the circumstances surrounding marriage, conception or birth of the child. As Masolo (1994) would say, that name connects the child to their living and dead genealogies and gives the child a place in the community of being. To have a place in a community implies an identity with the people. Every individual who belong to a cultural group therefore derives his or her sense of identity from the cultural group in which he or she grew up and was socialised.

Fashola (2014) is of the view that the belief that humans are necessarily beings-with-others is deeply rooted in African culture and in some cultures around the world. It is believed that human beings are constantly in need of a relationship with other human beings to be able to attain the true status of a person. For this reason, an individual can only be a person with the aid of other persons in the community. This is so because personness is not a biological construct as humanness. Personness is imputed on an individual by society when the individual lives an authentic and responsible life. This implies that the source of an individual's personness is tied to others, in such a way that they realise this fact with inner conviction. Meaning that, where there is no co-existence, no single individual has the right to lay claim to personness (Menkiti, 2004). Therefore, to exist is to be with others.

### **The necessity for communal life in African culture**

Social beings are constantly involved in an exchange with each other. This is because, in a community, a combination of individual interests makes up communal will and where the will of an individual conflicts with the general will, the general will, takes preeminence. The behaviour of an individual influences everyone around beginning with family and friends. Also, families influence other members of the community. A mother, for instance, encounters certain family demands and responds to them in a certain manner by transferring her frustrations to other members of the family. It is not out of place that this frustration could extend from the family to the entire society. Given that there is a link among beings, it is unimaginable for a noteworthy change to happen in one region without having some detectable effect in different territories which encroach upon it. Let us take, for instance, a family wherein the guardians have gone their separate

ways. One can anticipate that, that conjugal separation would affect the kids while the kids extend it to their companions in school and this could go on to influence the bigger society.

This is why Senghor (1966) is of the view that “the whole universe is a network of life forces.” For this reason, beings go out of themselves to interact with others. When this happens, there is a sharing or communication of vital energies one to another benevolently. Aquinas opined that when beings interact, they enhance or complete the beingness of others and they are as well enhanced or completed in the process. This communal interaction of social beings he believes sustains the universe and that it is the initiative of God to make it so since it is simply the very essence of God to share His love naturally. The interaction of beings could lead either to a strengthening or a weakening of force. In other words, some beings act malevolently. Rather than simply communicating their vital energies (forces) as in the case of fire lighting other things and yet remaining the same, these malevolent forces extract the forces of their victims leading to a diminution.

Since a community is an aggregate of parts where all the parts are harmoniously connected towards achieving a common objective, it bears a good relationship with Thomas Aquinas’ view of the life of beings, where exchange, cooperation, co-existence, togetherness and inter-subjectivity are the core values. This brings to mind the analysis of Fashola and Abiodun (2021) on the metaphysical significance of hair in Africa. They believe that the hair of an individual especially women is the covering of the head (ori) which in the Yoruba culture is the destiny bearer. They went on to assert that honour for the hair is an honor for the head. This belief was traced to the way of life of the Yorubas of Nigeria where people who plait hair for others in the society did not request fees as they did so as a form of ritual or religious rites and a social service. This service is believed to be necessary for social harmony since one good turn deserves another. This is why it is easy for any other person to return the favour without requesting fees. This act promotes inter-subjectivity which predisposes an individual to influence and be influenced. The basis for this inter-subjective life is traceable to the metaphysical understanding of the head as the destiny bearer and the hair as a covering for a person’s destiny.

Living in a society is one of the important behaviours of human beings and this is in keeping with Aristotle’s idea that “to live alone one must be either a beast or a god,” (Flynn, 2006) since human beings are neither beasts nor gods, they necessarily live in societies. But for them to enjoy any form of inter-subjective life certain norms or contracts had to be in place or there would be chaos which Hobbes says would make “the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short” (Hobbes 2002).

Since social beings interact, it is therefore impossible to rule out social conflicts. These conflicts are usually a result of conflicting opinions originating from freedom of the will. The role of the ego in demonstrating social inequality, injustice, and intolerance towards others is also not negligible. These social vices are not unconnected to the attractions of individualism and self-sufficiency of persons whose ethics emphasize self-interest and self-sufficiency to the detriment of society. This poses a great threat to inter-subjectivity and the survival of beings in a social world.

### **Democratic nature of African metaphysics of social order**

Democracy which is one of the social institutions that advocates equal rights of people for the promotion of order in society is discovered to have its foundation in metaphysics. The entire notion of democracy is not completely focused on political organisations, it also has a lot to do with social alliances which involve a deliberate struggle with respect to every part for the progression of normal welfare. It is a method of social living, for it exists in the lives and the ways of living of its individuals and is not separated as in some type of

political association. Democracy is based on a system of concord and not on cohesion. It is a general system where people are collaborating as opposed to going up against each other. It is also a general system wherein people are endeavouring to help instead of taking advantage of the other. It is a society where each individual is aware of the existence of the other in an inter-subjective manner (Hollingshead, 1941).

This majority rules system known as democracy is generally believed to have a Greek origin but it is known to have been a part of African life before ever coming in contact with the West. Leaders such as clan heads and chiefs in African communities may sometimes have been chosen based on age or wealth but in some cases, this is done by placing a pebble at the feet of their preferred candidate and the candidate with the highest number of pebbles wins. Disputes have been settled through a democratic system too, a situation where the elders come together to make decisions and cast votes by raising their hands in support of their positions.

The most broadly perceived significance of democracy was given by Abraham Lincoln as, the government of the people, for the people and by the people. To put it in another way we can say that it is a leadership decision that starts from the overall public; it is administered by the overall public, and with the true objective of the overall public for its very own points of interest (Becker and Jean-Aime, 2008). Etymologically, therefore, democracy is synonymous with the rule of the people.

Democracy has come to be regarded as that form of government which gives credence to modern political life. For this reason, rules, laws, and government policies are believed to be justified when they are democratic (Held, 1995). Democracy was instituted as a reaction against the absolute monarchy of the Kings who by their position as divine authorities imposed their personal sentiments on the people they governed. According to Rothbard, 2009) "The concept of parliamentary democracy began as a popular check upon absolute monarchical rule." It is noticed that in a democratic system, a high premium is placed on the importance of civic virtue and there is the desire for a balance of interest among citizens which is not the case in the authoritarian forms of government. So, democracy is generally conceived as the government of all people, by all people who have equal representation in government.

Democracy which is a majority rule system is a strategy for preventing individuals who would want to rule for life for their very own advantages. In a democratic system, those who rule are liable to processes which empower others to check their excesses or remove them from positions of authority- checks and balances. Crises and settlement patterns are in this manner established and power is decentralised. It is not for all time con-substantial with a specific individual or gathering, like in the case of monarchies, yet is practised rather by humans who are liable to expulsion and are responsible to other people, as per the principles of the equitable game (Norberto.1989).

Deliberation which is key to the democratic system is in fact, what makes the system inter-subjective. This shows that democracy is more than just electing representatives. It is concerned with matters involving the organisation of society. One mistake of classical democratic theory is the idea that the democratic system is only genuinely of the people during voting periods. Surely, democracies are about more than the act of voting alone.

The issues that impact election results change from one election to the next and the relative importance of these issues is itself one product of deliberations about politics among citizens. Besides, people are concerned about more than how they may decide on election days, they are interested in how best they can provide education for their kids or provide assistance for their families. As people connect to a great extent with each other, their leaders deliberate with each other, as well. These two degrees of thought are not

by any stretch of the imagination isolated and each illuminates the other. For instance, discussions conducted whether in Congress or perhaps in the Parliament are not simply thoughts between political powers, they are consultations which are frequently predicated on popular views and other factors (Thom, 2009).

From the above analysis, democracy can be seen as a social construct which in the final analysis has its basis in metaphysics. This is so because democracy is founded on the notion of inalienable rights. This means that without the recognition of human rights, there can be no democracy. These rights are described as inalienable because they are not given or transferred to anyone; rather, we have them a priori. We have them essentially before coming into existence. A simpler approach to appreciating the metaphysics of the social is to consider the democratic elements that encourage communication and inter-subjectivity. These elements are rooted in African ontology and they promote social order.

### **The metaphysical basis of the notion of being**

Metaphysics is concerned with an understanding of the notion of being, an ultimate reality that exists in and for itself. The concept of being can be described both as an animating principle and as an existential category. This dichotomy explains itself in the notion of being a 'life force' and being an 'entity'. In this dichotomy, the life force animates the entity in such a way that recognition is given to the entity because it is animated. In other words, the entity holds no relevance outside its animation. It is for this reason that idealists like Plato and Leibniz for instance deny the substantiality of bodies and only affirm the monadic being or metaphysical principle in things.

A being constitutes principles that are very necessary for its actual existence but it is not the case that these principles are not present in things in equal measure. This is because the rank or position of a being is given by the measure of excellence and possible vitalforce that being has in connection with the ultimate Being. It is also the case that the closer any being is to the ultimate Being, the more perfect it is and the more force it wields.

Being in African ontology is grouped into categories of two, the second category is further grouped into two. The first group is referred to as the self-creating while the second is the created being. God occupies the first class and he is the creator, he is infinite, eternal, he is uncaused and is essentially or necessarily an existing being. The second category is recognised as belonging to the finite and contingent beings that rely on God for their existence.

The position of God in the hierarchy of things as the supreme being is widely accepted. This group of finite beings are further categorised into metaphysical and corporeal where angels, divinities or deities (ancestors inclusive) are said to occupy the metaphysical world while human beings (except the soul), animals, plants, and minerals occupy the corporeal world. The soul does not belong to the corporeal world which is why when the body disintegrates at death, the soul is believed to go back to the metaphysical world.

Tempels (1959) holds that "all being is force... God, men, living and the departed, animals, plants, minerals" are all forces. To be endowed with force means to be endowed with life, the Bantu according to Tempels (1959) say, "We never speak of the 'force of life' because with us life and force are one, and the same thing." In other words, they never talk about the being of life since life and being are one and something very similar. Force or being is used both in the universal and particular sense, for example, humans are beings in the same manner as this particular human, 'Akin' is a being. Birds are beings in the same manner as different species of birds are beings. The trees in the same way as a particular mango tree, animals- a goat for example

are beings. For the Bantu people just like Aquinas, force is a basic, supernatural, and undisputable concept. It is connected to whatever has life not minding its position in the hierarchy of forces. Being alludes likewise to the supernatural constituent of a concrete, existing stuff in reality.

Aquinas believes that “the human soul, unlike the souls of plants and beasts, is subsistent: that it continues to exist after separating from the body in death” (Eleonore, 2003). Parmenides believes that being does not change ontologically, that being is one, eternal and unchanging which means that whatever changes is not being. This is not a problem because non-being does not exist anyway. This is the reason Leibniz describes the monad as windowless and self-actuating. Aquinas believes that no being in the universe exists by chance and without purpose. He believes that beings exist for them to perfect the universe. So, a departure from the purpose of any being leads to chaos in the universe. This is why matter or bodies will continue to occupy their places in the metaphysical space.

When matter decomposes or disintegrates, it does not go out of existence. whatever comes into existence does not go out of existence otherwise, it was never in existence. This is the reason for the eternity of the soul as held by Plato. With this, the rejection of the substantiality and eternity of matter by Plato and Leibniz raises questions. Matter, once in existence, it will be absurd to consider it to stop existing at any point in time. The only condition if at all matter can go out of existence is the time souls can go out of existence. And according to Leibniz, this can only happen by annihilation or total dissolution of the universe by God. Thus, no disintegration is to be dreaded for them, and a non-aggregate substance cannot die in any possible way. For a similar reason, no simple substance comes into existence naturally, since it cannot be framed piece by piece.

According to Wildon, (1926) “There is nothing dead, nothing absolutely inert in the universe. To be absolutely dead is not to be.” Air bubbles when trapped in a bottle of water may be thought to be non-existent because it is invisible, but that is not the case. It can only cease to exist when the bottle is broken, a process which would lead to the destruction of the bubbles, the water and the bottle altogether. This is the total annihilation Leibniz talked about. This argument is supported by Aristotle’s description of Form and Matter as well as Act and Potency. The vaporisation of liquid in the presence of heat does not mean it has ceased to exist rather, it has simply changed form. This is the reason every act is in the potency of becoming.

### **African metaphysics in the promotion of social order**

The promotion of social order is at the core of African metaphysics. This research found that, the individual is inherently a communal being who cannot thrive in isolation and that human relationships are both metaphysical and physical in nature. It found that a dichotomy of ‘I’ and ‘them’ is capable of breeding social conflicts. It also presented the fact that African metaphysics promotes the ethics of care for future generations and thinking in a hierarchical manner which encourages peaceful coexistence. These findings are hereby analysed below;

### **Critical Findings**

- i. **The individual is inherently communal being who cannot thrive in isolation:** The community in the traditional African thought system is considered superior to the individual. This notion is captioned in the popular African sayings that a tree cannot make a forest, and that the strength of a broom is in the bunch and not in the individual broomstick. These sayings also do not only connote the notion of unity of purpose for the progress of any people but as well, the social order

that results from togetherness. Gyekye (1997) gives support to this view when he describes Afro-communitarianism as that which “immediately sees the individual as an inherently communal being, embedded in a context of social relationships and interdependence, never as an isolated individual.”

- ii. **Human relationships are both metaphysical and physical:** In Tempels’ view, (Matolino 2009) the individual is not only a being that cannot be ontologically divorced from the community, he also cannot be separated from his divine source. This is clearly expressed in the popular saying that a river that neglects its source runs dry. Tempels believes that the living (*muntu*) as a being is in a metaphysical relation with God, with his clan brethren, with his family and with his descendants. He is in a similar ontological relationship with his patrimony, his land with all that it contains or produces, with all that grows or lives on it. This is where the notion of ancestor receives its validation. According to Mbiti in Apologun, (2020) African metaphysics is both spiritual and human-centered. This is why it is designed to maintain spiritual harmony, social cohesion, and solidarity. It is designed to connect and direct the individual being along the line of mental and emotional stability. It is evident here that the notion of social order is an important aspect of African metaphysics as it seeks to promote the harmony of beings.
- iii. **A dichotomy of ‘I’ and ‘them’ is capable of breeding social conflicts:** Mbiti (1970) is known for a very important axiom that describes the totality of the relationship between the self and the other or the individual and the community. He opined, “I am because we are; and since we are, therefore I am.” Adeati (2023) says that we may interpret what exists between the “I” and “we” as a form of complementary relationship that makes the difference between them unnoticed. He went on to say that this relationship affirms a social ordering that is guided by the “I” and “we” in a complementary relationship for self-actualisation, and not “I” and “them” in constant conflict of opposites.
- iv. **It promotes the ethics of care for future generations:** This Mbitian axiom Adeate (2023) insists, is a philosophy that emphasises individual members of society as being involved in an unbroken web of obligatory relationships. He noted that, apart from the living members of the community engaging in continuous obligations to one another, the different components of the community in African thought, such as the unborn, infants, living, the living dead and the collective immortals, are associated with social performance. The unborn and infants do not perform duties but hold ethical significance in that they are recipients of duties from the living. The living should prepare a better society for them through their moral choices and actions.
- v. **Thinking hierarchically encourages peaceful coexistence:** At the Ontological level, Africans, as noted by Esen (1982) reason with a hierarchical structure in mind. He noted that the existence of beings necessarily follows this order of hierarchy where at the apex is the Supreme Being, the creator of all things. Other beings such as ancestors, humans, nonhuman animals, plants and simple matter proceed downwards in this hierarchy. This mode of metaphysical thinking shows the level at which order is desired and promoted by Africans. Within this ontological hierarchy of beings, Etim (2013) posited that humans act and live per their essences as created beings. Other beings both natural and metaphysical have roles to play in the determination of human existence. This he says, is responsible for the many sacrifices that Africans in traditional societies performed as means of sustaining the balance and harmony among beings.

## Conclusion

Social beings are inter-subjective and possess freewill as against beings which are individualistic and deterministic. This is because individualistic beings have distinctive behaviours which are that they neither

affect nor are affected by other beings, they are self-sufficient and are programmed to behave or perceive the world in their peculiar ways. Social beings on the other hand possess freewill, are not determined and thus, experience inter-subjective existence. This shows that the quest for solidarity and inter-subjectivity in the life of social beings is an important venture and African metaphysics has demonstrated this possibility.

The paper emphasised that the individual is a being that cannot be ontologically divorced from the community because that is where he finds his essence since without the community, an individual is basically an outcast. This need to be a part of a group relationship brings unity and provides safety and a sense of belonging to the individual. This is the reason for Mbiti's emphasis that this relationship affirms a social ordering that is guided by the "I" and "we" in a complementary relationship for self-actualisation, and not "I" and "them" in constant conflict of opposites. African metaphysics may be seen as possessing spiritual relevance but its social implications cannot be underestimated. It conceives of the individual as an inherently communal being, embedded in a context of constant social relationships and interdependence, never as an isolated individual. This paper contributes to the various discourses and knowledge of the African worldview as a means of engendering social order.

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